Chapter XX

Schemas of Disrepute: Digital Damage to the Code

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents marketers, sporting management and sports organizations with a technique for analyzing consumer schemas associated with athletes. Correspondence analysis is a frequently used tool for social network analysis that evaluates relationships between actors and events. Correspondence analysis allows examination of the effectiveness of positioning efforts, as well as the assessment of potential brand damage caused by the off-field activities of athletes and endorsers. This technique can be used for snap-shot analyses of events, or longitudinal evaluation of changes in consumer and media schemas over time. The digital emphasis of the paper incorporates use of both non-traditional and external media commentary made about athletes and brands. Where media commentary is not controlled by management groups or brands, evaluation of potential schemas developing out of external media sources becomes important. Web logs, fan sites, and other digital information sources outside the control of sport managers contribute to the development of consumer perceptions, potentially affecting consumer sport involvement and merchandising revenue. When external media sources focus primarily on negative on- and off-field behavior by athletes, we suggest that there is potential for digital damage to sporting codes and brands.

INTRODUCTION

Viewing of major sporting events is growing rapidly. It is also changing in nature. Stadiums are expensive to build and take years in planning and permissions yet game attendance is constrained by stadium size. Revenue increase based on fan viewing is therefore dependent on developing new audiences, or alternative distribution networks to existing and potential audiences. For
example, in Australia, the Australian Football League (hereafter, AFL) is working to expand its traditional consumer market to regions that do not traditionally boast a high level of support for the code. They have also incorporated a model of corporate responsibility in an appeal to women and indigenous Australians (AFL, 2007). The National Football League (hereafter, NFL) in the United States, engages in similar market expansion strategies, appealing to women, ethnic and international markets (Bhargava, 2007). This is because there is always a limit to the number of club memberships that can be sold, and seats that can be filled. New media audiences, those online: consuming streaming video and audio commentary, cable or high definition television join with electronic gaming and other merchandising activities to provide access to a larger market. New media audiences are not constrained by the size of physical stadiums; in fact, they may not be constrained by much at all.

This lack of constraint in new media usage and service provision is a frequently cited problem among moralists. The common complaints associated with new media include age-appropriate content; access to unregulated content; violence and nudity. These issues are not often associated with sport, except in the case of electronic or video games. However, the lack of control of new media content provides an interesting problem for sporting bodies. Emerging from the new media field is the potential that consumer perceptions may be influenced by sources external to the clubs and traditional news sources that have up until now provided sporting news and information.

In this chapter, we present the results of a study into the interactions between an athlete’s name as discussed in user-generated internet communications, and attitudes to the sporting body to which he/she belongs as well as the brand names of the sporting body’s sponsors. We begin with a discussion of the background to this research.

**BACKGROUND**

As the penultimate game of the NFL, the Super Bowl is routinely investigated because of its economic impact and advertising spectacle. However, Super Bowl crowds have not increased much since the inception of the competition. In 1967 attendance at the first game was 61,946; while in the last 20 years it has averaged 73,600 (NFL, n.d). Despite this, revenues are strong. Following the 2008 event Arizona reportedly gained additional income of $500 million from an average tourist spend of $600 per day, during a four day visit (Associated Press, 2008). This type of figure alone indicates the importance of research into this area. That said, game attendance and tourist spending provide only half the picture of commercial sport as a business.

Speculation about attendance figures for the Indianapolis 500 has occurred each year since Tony Hulman purchased the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1945. It appears that this will be a perennially unresolved issue (Cavin, 2004). The Speedway provides approximately 250,000 ticketed seats, a large crowd by any standard, although unsubstantiated guess-estimates of race day crowds have reached as high as 400,000 (Cavin, 2004). Spectators who do not hold tickets for seats stand on spectator mounds, and it is this group that is hardest to count. Yet it is still only a fraction of the real audience.

For the 2008 race, 50 hours of broadcast were scheduled for television and radio (Powell, 2008). Podcasts and other multimedia events were provided by the series organizers and various race sponsors during the month of May. Authorized and scheduled media exposure of this event is extensive. Unofficial commentary, including websites endorsing all manner of racing paraphernalia, blog sites, and commercial sites that are effectively engaged in ambush marketing, are also to be found. The resultant noise surrounding the event can make it difficult to distinguish between the official sites and myriad others.
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